



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

24th November 2021

Report of the Chief Executive

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected:

All Wards

Report Title: Short Term Service Resilience Framework

Purpose of the Report:

1. To describe the increased risk that essential services will be disrupted as a result of exceptional service demands and reduced workforce capacity.
2. To propose a strategy that will minimise the risk of service disruption in the short term.

Background

Welsh Government reduced the alert level to Level Zero on 7th August 2021. The relaxation of restrictions was possible due to:

- The roll out of the vaccine programme and the health protection benefits that double vaccination was providing;

- The R (reproduction) number had fallen to between 0.8 and 1.1 for Wales as a whole;
- Case numbers for Wales were declining – in NPT the case rate had fallen to 119.3 per 100,000 population compared with a case rate of over 1,000 cases per 100,000 population over the Christmas 2020 period
- Whilst pressure within the NHS was generally increasing, the number of COVID-19 related patients occupying a hospital bed had fallen to 180 across Wales and there were 22 patients occupying critical care beds - 142 beds lower than the maximum COVID-19 position of approximately 164.

At Level Zero, there are no legal limits on the number of people who can meet, including in private homes, public places or at events. In addition, all businesses and premises may be open. However, a number of key rules which have a basis in law continue:

- Businesses, employers and other organisations must continue to undertake a specific coronavirus risk assessment and take reasonable measures to minimise exposure to, and the spread of, coronavirus;
- Everyone must self-isolate for 10 days if they test positive for COVID-19. If you are a close contact of someone who has tested positive and you are aged 18 or over and not fully vaccinated, you must also self-isolate for 10 days. The Welsh Government has also recently tightened rules on self-isolation and we are waiting on final details at the time of drafting this report;
- Adults and children aged 11 and over must continue to wear face coverings in indoor public places, with the exception of hospitality settings such as restaurants, pubs, cafes or nightclubs.

Since the decision to move to Level Zero, Welsh Government has made a number of further announcements to strengthen mitigation measures at Level Zero. Some of the more significant changes include:

- An updated infection control framework for schools and colleges effective from the start of the autumn term 2021;
- An offer of further vaccination to those who are severely immunosuppressed;
- An offer of vaccination to 12-15 year olds;
- The commencement of a booster vaccination programme for those in priority groups 1-9;
- Various changes to arrangements for international travellers;
- The introduction of COVID-19 passes for certain venues

The relaxation of restrictions and the increased social mixing that subsequently occurred has resulted in a significant increase in the transmission of COVID-19 across Wales and within NPT. At 24th October 2021 the 7 day rolling average was 1037.6 cases per 100,000 population with a positivity rate of 31.1% which at the time of compiling this report had fallen back to 653.8 cases/100,000 population and a positivity rate of 27.7%. The re-opening of society and the economy is also generating a high level of demand for a range of services, this alongside the additional work the Council continues to undertake as part of the wider national effort to protect the NHS and the public health, such as Test, Trace, Protect.

Additionally, we are also facing difficulties in recruiting and retaining a sufficient workforce due to the impact of BREXIT, a stronger than anticipated economic recovery and the departure of people from the labour market - referenced as the 'great resignation' by some national commentators. The result of this is the labour market is far more competitive than it has been for many years.

Therefore, pressure on Council services is now more intense than at any time since the pandemic began, a position shared across public services. Looking ahead, the modelling undertaken by Government advisers suggests that ill health amongst our communities could deteriorate further over the winter period with seasonal influenza and other respiratory diseases combining with the ongoing COVID-19 situation. Our immediate priority

must therefore be to take actions that will support our workforce and secure the continuity of essential services.

A Short Term Service Resilience Framework

This framework has been developed to support our workforce and to improve the resilience in essential services to secure the continuity of those services over the short term. We will need to continue to adapt the framework as the situation changes around us. Over the remainder of the autumn and into 2022 we will prioritise the following actions:

- **Priority One** - Protect the health, safety and wellbeing of our workforce;
- **Priority Two** – Continue to work in partnership with Public Health Wales and the Local Health Board to help protect the wider public health;
- **Priority Three** – Sustain essential services.

Priority One – Protect the health, safety and wellbeing of our workforce

The Council's workforce has demonstrated exceptional commitment and dedication over the course of the pandemic. At an early point in the pandemic, there were explicit expressions of public support – for example, the weekly clap for essential workers. However, as society has opened back up, public expectations have shifted and it is clear that there is limited public understanding of the continuing pressures being experienced across the public service and a frustration that services have not returned to normality in a number of areas. Furthermore, whilst our workforce remains committed to serving the communities of Neath Port Talbot, after 20 months of response, staff are tired and there are signs that morale is being adversely affected in those services facing the most acute pressure. The bonus payments made to social care staff have also regrettably created

resentment amongst other parts of the workforce so it is important that the Council's approach to employee recognition is fair and inclusive.

The key actions we will take are:

- Continuing to monitor rates and patterns of infection in the community and adjust health and safety measures accordingly;
- Continuing to promote the benefits of vaccination to our workforce;
- Continuing to remind staff to get tested and to self-isolate if they present with symptoms of coronavirus;
- Continuing to ensure there are up to date risk assessments in place for all services and that these are well communicated to staff and adhered to;
- Increase face to face opportunities for individual and team supervision;
- Continuing to provide staff with suitable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);
- Continuing to maintain infection, prevention and control measures across all services;
- Continuing to require the workforce to work from home where this is possible. The move to a hybrid model for office-based workers will be deferred to January 2022 at the earliest as will the re-opening of civic centres to the public;
- Promoting and extending the range of wellbeing services and support available to our workforce with a specific emphasis on mental wellbeing, keeping active, eating well ,limiting alcohol intake and quitting smoking;
- Ensuring senior officers and managers are visible to the workforce and there is regular engagement. We will also explore additional ways to appreciate the continuing commitment and dedication of our staff.

Priority Two – Continue to work in partnership with Public Health Wales and the Local Health Board to help protect the wider public health

Since June 2020, the Council has played a significant role in creating and delivering the Test, Trace, Protect Service locally and regionally.

The Council leads the work regionally to amplify the public health messages conveyed by the governments and initiates local communications activities where required – for example local warning and informing activities where there are outbreaks in specific workplaces or in specific communities. There is also a continuing focus on ensuring those hardest to reach are getting the important public health messages regarding the vaccination programme and the core public health messages that help to prevent the spread of the disease as well as continuous communication to the Council's workforce.

Environmental Health Officers have been at the heart of the health protection response analysing health surveillance information and providing expert advice to individuals, businesses and other organisations including care homes and schools. The Council also set up and continues to deliver a contact tracing service, providing advice and guidance to those who have tested positive for Covid-19, are close contacts or returning travellers.

A number of Council departments have also been instrumental in enforcing compliance with Covid-19 including Trading Standards, Environmental Health, Licensing, Community Safety in partnership with other agencies such as South Wales Police.

Wider support has also been provided to the NHS by way of use of buildings, car parks and other facilities etc.

Priority actions will include:

- Continuing to promote the benefits of vaccination to the local population;
- Continuing to promote the benefits of the key health behaviours – face, space, distance, ventilation;
- Continuing to provide facilities and other support to the NHS to enable testing and vaccination of the population;
- Amplifying Welsh Government health messages – for example the Help us Help You campaign;
- Continuing to deliver the Test, Trace, Protect Service to help control the spread of coronavirus;

Priority Three – Sustaining Essential Services

There are a number of factors that are placing acute strain on the Council's capacity to sustain some essential service operations. These include:

- The need for staff to take leave deferred during the initial phases of response in 2020. Some staff had taken little leave at all during the last 12 months and clearly for health and safety reasons this cannot be sustained;
- Levels of sickness absence/self-isolation due to the very high level of Covid-19 community transmission and seasonal respiratory diseases circulating;
- Natural turnover of staff due to retirements and difficulties being experienced in recruiting replacement staff as a consequence of a more competitive labour market;
- Unplanned departures of staff as a result of more attractive alternative employment within the labour market and sustained acute pressure within the service area with difficulties in recruiting alternatives;
- Limitations on capacity as a result of the need to maintain control measures to manage the ongoing risk of Covid-19 transmission in the workplace; and

- Exceptional levels of demand for some services. For example, Environmental Health Officers have had to focus on the pandemic response with a large backlog of work now having accrued in relation to other areas of work – for example inspection of food premises.

There is now an elevated risk that we will be unable to sustain essential services due to insufficient workforce capacity. As well as taking steps to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of the workforce we need to take immediate steps to strengthen service resilience in those services facing the most acute pressures (see section that follows for detail).

All managers have been asked to review and update their business continuity plans and to ensure any new/emerging service pressures are escalated immediately to the attention of the Corporate Directors Group so we can act early and prevent reaching a point of crisis. It is proposed that a service resilience financial reserve is established within the cash limits established for this financial year to facilitate the actions identified.

Priority areas currently include:

Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning

- Increase service resilience in catering and cleaning services;
- Support schools to maintain business continuity and protect the wellbeing of school Leaders and the wider schools workforce

Environment Directorate

- Increase service resilience in Streetcare Services to ensure a larger pool of staff to support refuse and recycling operations; strengthen neighbourhood services to 'catch up' on works that were deprioritised during the initial response phases; strengthen drainage teams to reflect the increased frequency of inclement weather/flood response requirements;

- Recruit to vacancies in planning, engineering, transport and regeneration;
- Maintain the number of staff employed in the Test, Trace and Protect Services and increase the number of staff available to support other statutory functions within the Environmental Health Service to begin addressing the backlog of work;

Social Services, Health and Housing Directorate

- Strengthen capacity within early intervention and prevention services – Local Area Co-ordination and NPT Safe and Well –to prevent and the need for vulnerable residents to access more specialist/acute services through the Local Area Co-ordinators and the NPT Safe and Well Service identify those vulnerable residents who are lonely and/or isolated and those who may be in need of support to prevent falls and to keep warm;
- Understand the reasons for the increased turnover in Children’s Social Work Services and identify immediate steps to stem this;
- Continue to work with Swansea Council and the Swansea Bay Health Board to continuously refine pathways for patients/service users needing to leave hospital;
- Bring forward proposals to address pressures in housing and homelessness services.
- Working through the Regional Partnership Board, build further capacity in the community and voluntary sector with a focus on keeping people well and ensuring access to early offers of help and support for those that need it;
- Working through the Regional Partnership Board ensure unpaid carers can continue to access help and support so that they can continue caring;

- Engage with the national recruitment campaign and form a local recruitment taskforce to promote the social care sector and increase the pool of paid carers;
- Where appropriate, work through the Regional Partnership Board to initiate joint recruitment campaigns to increase the pool of paid carers and other social care staff;
- Continue to work with external residential care providers to improve their resilience;

Corporate Services

- Increase the number of staff within Digital Services to support the significantly increased use of digital technology across the workforce;
- Establish additional recruitment support (18 months) within the Human Resources and Organisational Development Department to support this plan and the other changes to contracts of employment needed to support hybrid working;
- Review capacity within the corporate procurement service.

Recover, Reset, Renew

Good progress has been made in developing the Council's longer term approach to recovery over summer 2021. A draft revised vision, values, wellbeing objectives and corporate principles have been developed. The Let's Talk campaign concluded in October 2021 and the feedback received confirms the areas of focus that need to feature within the recovery programme. The actions set out in this Service Resilience Framework will ensure service operations are stable over the next twelve months, paving the way for the longer term process of recovery to begin.

It is still intended that the draft recovery plan will be presented to elected members before the Christmas break and to seek authority in early January 2022 for formal consultation to commence on that draft plan.

As has been the case from the outset of the pandemic, we will need to continuously adjust the time spent on immediate priorities with the need to also plan for the longer term as the external environment changes.

Oversight, Monitoring and Review

The Chief Executive chairs the Chief Officer Group who will oversee this plan. The Group currently meets weekly but this is varied according to the prevailing situation. Regular scheduled meetings also take place between the Chief Officer Group, Heads of Service, Trade Union Representatives and Accountable Managers to ensure a two way flow of information.

Internal communication channels have been significantly strengthened over the pandemic period - for example a weekly bulletin 'the Sway' is issued to all employees so they are kept up to date. A number of surveys have been undertaken to gather information about the wellbeing of the workforce and to solicit views on proposed changes. Further internal communication activities are in development, including extended use of the Microsoft suite of products and these will be implemented over the winter period.

The Chief Executive will continue to report regularly to the political leadership of the Council on the overall position advising any new actions that are considered necessary. Reports will also continue to be made to the Coronavirus Member Panel established by Council to advise the Cabinet and Council on response and recovery actions and as necessary to the Personnel Committee. Service specific reports will be made to the relevant committees of the Council as the situation requires.

Chief Officers and Cabinet Members will also continue to engage in regional arrangements and national networks to both inform national and regional policy and to ensure there is early notice of further actions that might be required.

Financial Impacts:

It is proposed that a service resilience reserve is created to the value of £2million to support the improvements to service resilience described above. The budget monitoring report will show that the budget is currently projected to underspend and the reserve provision proposed is affordable within the cash limit already approved for 2021/22.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

A first stage impact assessment has been undertaken to assist the Council in discharging its legislative duties (under the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

The first stage assessment, attached at Appendix 1, has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required as the measures seek to sustain the existing service operations.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

There are no new impacts for valleys communities as these measures seek to sustain the existing service operations.

Workforce Impacts:

The measures outline in this report seek to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of the Council's existing workforce. The measures also seek to retain the services of the existing workforce and to supplement workforce capacity by increasing the pool of people available to deal with the additional demand being experienced in some service areas, vacancies in

the workforce caused by planned and unplanned departures whilst also strengthening resilience.

Legal Impacts:

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places a duty on the Chief Executive to protect the health, safety and welfare at work of all our employees as well as others on our premises including, temporary staff, casual workers, the self-employed, visitors and the general public.

The steps identified in this report will also ensure the Council meets its obligations pursuant to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and the need to ensure that the Council keeps its performance under review and ensures it is using resources economically, efficiently and effectively. Proposed consultations which are referenced in this report by way of the draft recovery plan will also contribute to meet these legislative requirements.

Risk Management Impacts:

For the reasons set out in the body of this report, there is an elevated risk that the Council will be unable to sustain essential services due to insufficient workforce capacity.

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item

Recommendations:

1. That a specific reserve in the value of £2 million is established within the cash limit already approved for 2021/22 to implement the measures set out in this report to mitigate the risk that the Council

will be unable to sustain essential services due to insufficient workforce capacity.

2. That the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer, Leader of Council and Cabinet Member for Equalities and Corporate Services is authorised to apply the reserve for the purposes outlined in this report.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To ensure the Council implements mitigation measures to enable essential services to be sustained.

Implementation of Decision:

The decision is an urgent one for immediate implementation, subject to the consent of the relevant Scrutiny Chair and is therefore not subject to the call-in procedure.

Appendices:

None

List of Background Papers:

None

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